
EDITORIALS

Responsibilities of an Editor[†]

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Preparation for Role as Editor

For most societies/institutions, this is an honour that is bestowed upon a member of that organisation upon retirement of the incumbent editor, or it is an entirely new appointment for the organisation to bring forth the inaugural issue of the journal.

Whichever is the case, there is usually no formal preparation for the selected candidate to assume the role of editor. He has to learn and cope with his responsibilities on the job.

Obviously, the organisation that made the selection has possibly based the appointment on the following criteria:

1. his/her track record as an author, academic, researcher or reviewer,
2. past experience on editorial boards, and
3. personal interest in medical “journalology” or “editology”.

These are the terms that possibly do not appear in the English dictionary because they were coined to describe the new science of medical writing and editing. I was first exposed to the term “journalology” by Stephen Lock a decade ago when he conducted the 1st Medical Writing and Editing Workshop here in Singapore. The term “editology” is a Chinese invention—by the China Editology Society of Science Periodicals which began in 1987. They launched a new journal devoted entirely to the study of the science editing called “*Acta Editologica*” in 1989. The Society aimed at raising the knowledge base and training of editors. In 1990, a supplement was brought out with “140 pages of guidance to editors of Chinese medical journals on everything from the basic rules of chinese phonetic alphabet to statistical symbols and also on poetry as a means of transmitting scientific information. The Society has also translated the Uniform Requirements of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (The Vancouver Group) into Chinese”. So maybe aspiring editors or editors new to their job should consider being members of this new Chinese Society of Editology or be subscribers to “*Acta Editologica*” !

Responsibilities of Editors

The role of the Editor varies with the type of journal he/she is charged with editing. Obviously, the wider the circulation of the journal, the greater would be the responsibilities of the Editor.

One can imagine the impact of a lead article or an editorial on a readership of 600,000 physicians throughout the world (as is the case with *JAMA*) or the *Annals of Internal Medicine* with a circulation of 100,000.

However, irrespective of the nature of the circulation/type of journal, there are common areas of responsibilities that encompasses all editors be they full-time or part-time editors and also independent of the size of their journal.

They are:

1. Responsibilities to the Society/ Institution that appointed them
2. Responsibilities to the Authors
3. Responsibilities to the Reviewers
4. Responsibilities to the Readers
5. Social Responsibilities

I shall deal with each of these areas of responsibilities in turn and also important issues related to them such as editorial freedom and integrity.

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[†]Presented at the 4th Workshop on Medical Writing and Editing which was held from 7 to 9 October 1994.

Relationship with Appointing Body

- “Medical journal owners and editors have a common endeavour, the publishing of a reliable and readable journal.....(but) the functions of owners and editors, however, are quite different. The owners have the right to appoint and dismiss editors and to make important business decisions, in which editors should be involved to the fullest extent possible”.
- “Editors MUST have full authority for determining the editorial content of the journal”.
- “The concept of editorial freedom should be resolutely defended by editors even to the extent of placing their (editorial) position at stake”.
- “Medical journal editors should have a contract that clearly states the editor’s rights and duties in addition to the general terms of the appointment and defines mechanisms for resolving conflict.”
- “An independent editorial advisory Board may be useful in helping the editor establish and maintain editorial policy”.
- “All editors and editor’s organisations have the obligation to support the concept of editorial freedom and to draw major transgressions of such freedom to the attention of the international medical community”.

These are abstracts from the statement made by the Vancouver Group and published in *JAMA*, Vol 260 No 17 in 1988. This was unanimously approved by all the leading editors of major circulation journals and I suggest that all editors should be familiar with this statement especially in their relationship with their appointing bodies.

George Lundberg¹ editor of *JAMA*, had mentioned in his editorial commentary on this important statement, that readers, the public, patients should be able to put their trust implicitly in our peer-reviewed journals, in the knowledge that owners of journals “**will not interfere with the editorial product in order to serve their own self-interest**”.

Fortunately with the *Annals, Academy of Medicine, Singapore* in all my years as Editor² and as a member of the editorial board, these questions of editorial freedom and integrity have never arisen. The Editor has the responsibility to uphold and maintain the goals and objectives of the Organisation that he/she serves. These are included in the article and memoranda of the Academy which are:

1. To advance the art and science of medicine
2. To discuss medical and scientific problems
3. To maintain and promote the highest standards of professional practice
4. To foster and sustain postgraduate education
5. To maintain a high code of ethical conduct amongst its members
6. To represent the opinions of the members of Academy of Medicine
7. To protect the interest and dignity of the Academy of Medicine

The relationship of the Editor with the appointing body should be one of mutual respect—responsibilities of upholding the good name of the organisation versus editorial freedom. Both should understand that the profession as well as the public demand the truth (or as correct as humanly possible) in the contents of the journal at all times and this is only possible if editorial freedom is preserved.

Responsibilities to Reviewers/ Authors

For journals which believe in the blinding of peer-review process such as the *Annals, Academy of Medicine, Singapore*, the responsibility of maintaining confidentiality is an important one.

Authors’ manuscripts should be respected as their private property. The ideas contained within, the results of months or years of research which are still unpublished—must be protected and treated with the greatest care and confidentiality.

Reviewers should be reminded by editors to treat authors’ manuscripts as confidential documents. Just as editors maintain the confidentiality of referees’ reports, so referees themselves should remember that they are confidential advisors to the editor.

All authors expect a quick response from the editor. The turn around time for an article submitted to the *Annals* is about 6 to 12 months. Authors need to have an understanding of the lengthy but necessary peer-review process so that their relationship and communication with the editor can always remain cordial and objective. After all, no editor would wish to delay a publication if at all possible and such delays are usually inevitable due to nature of the editorial review process.

Social Responsibilities of Editors

Medical journals are directed in the main at physicians but, at the same time, they have tremendous impact on patient care and therefore the public. Editors must be aware of their role as medical educators and transmitters of accurate, reliable and peer-reviewed information for the general community, thereby assuming an important social role.

Editors of wide circulation journals such as *JAMA*³ take upon themselves these social responsibilities by:

1. fostering debate on controversial issues that affect the public such as alcoholism, psychoactive drugs, boxing, prevention of nuclear war, state-sponsored torture;
2. promoting higher standards of medical journalism so that public is better informed; and
3. providing a critique of new diagnostic and therapeutic technology.

Finally

The Editor's prime responsibility must be towards good science and new knowledge that can be provided to the readers within a reasonable time-frame.

In order to ensure that the information given to our readers are the most accurate, up-to-date and reliable, we need to be critical of authors as well as the peer-review process itself. In guarding the guardians, hopefully we can disseminate the best science to all our readers.

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The Aftermath of the George Lundberg Affair: Comments on Editorial Independence and the Relationships between Editors and Appointing Bodies

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Two months have elapsed since the controversial sacking of George D. Lundberg, the highly esteemed editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. He was summarily dismissed from his post, a position he had held for 17 years, by the Executive Vice-President of AMA, E. Ratcliffe Anderson, on 15 January 1999.^{1,2} The stated reason for his dismissal was that “Dr Lundberg, through his recent actions, has threatened the historic tradition and integrity of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* by inappropriately and inexcusably interjecting *JAMA* into a major political debate that has nothing to do with science or medicine”. The actions referred to was the intended publication of an article on the survey of the sexual behaviour of undergraduate students from 29 states in the US and their definition of what constitutes sex. This article has since appeared in the January 20, 1999 issue of *JAMA*. The “crime” that George Lundberg had allegedly committed was to accelerate the peer review process of this manuscript to allow its publication to coincide with the Congressional impeachment debate of President Bill Clinton, thereby politicising the journal.

The sacking elicited an immediate and spontaneous response from medical editors worldwide.³ Most who wrote into the *JAMA* and the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* websites expressed a sense of outrage at the precipitate manner in which a prominent and distinguished editor had been dismissed and felt that the reasons for his dismissal by the AMA Executive Vice-President were unacceptable and unjustified. Arnold Relman,⁴ Emeritus Editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* summed up the feelings of editors as follows: “Dr Anderson refers to his appreciation for the editorial independence and integrity of the journal when what he does undermines that very independence and integrity (of *JAMA*). His actions belie his words”. The President of the Council of Biology Editors, Patricia Huston,⁵ concurred and similarly expressed “that when Dr Anderson dismissed the Editor-in-chief on the basis of the publication of a peer-reviewed study, he blatantly usurped editorial freedom”.

Many courses of actions were suggested by the correspondents who wrote in, either directly to Dr Anderson and the AMA or to *JAMA* and *BMJ* websites. There were strong condemnation of the actions of the Executive Vice-President, calls for his removal and the re-instatement of the Editor, appeals for boycott of the journal by subscribers and authors and even the establishment of an award on editorial integrity to be named after George Lundberg.

As quickly as the storm arose, it settled. On 3 February 1999, the AMA and George Lundberg issued a joint statement⁶ to announce that both parties had reached agreement on the terms of Dr Lundberg’s departure as editor of *JAMA*. This surprisingly rapid and amicable settlement was broached, purportedly for the continuity of the journal so that it can “carry through its mission without distraction” and also in the best interests of *JAMA*. AMA immediately proceeded to appoint a search committee to identify a successor to George Lundberg. Dr Anderson⁷ stated that “we will encourage the Committee to take as much time as necessary to make sure that they find the right person for the job” and the *JAMA* press release emphasised that “Editorial Independence is key in selecting the new *JAMA* Editor”. George Lundberg himself was named as the Editor-in-Chief of Medscape, a leading medical website on the Internet, a post he readily accepted.

Although the whole saga of the sacking of George Lundberg as editor of *JAMA* appears to be over with the announced settlement between AMA and George Lundberg, for the rest of the medical editors worldwide who were caught in this editorial storm of the sacking and the subsequent protests, the whole issue of editorial independence and integrity have remained largely unresolved. There is a pall of gloom and uncertainty that now hangs over the heads of editors. This episode has re-surfaced the sensitive and important issue of the special relationship between the editor and the appointing body. Going through the minds of most medical editors now is the thought that if George Lundberg, a pre-eminent and larger-than-life editor of perhaps the biggest circulation journal in the world can be given

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the sack for an allegedly simple editorial lapse, what holds sway for lesser mortals? All members of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) must be concerned about their continued independence and integrity of their respective journals and perhaps more importantly, the security of their employment or post. Will they now have to constantly look over their shoulders to ensure that they do not incur the wrath and displeasure of their journal owners or appointing bodies?

The special relationship between the editor and the journal owner varies a great deal between major circulation journals (*JAMA*, *BMJ*, *NEJM* and *Lancet*) which employ full-time editors and the smaller circulation journals (specialty journals, medical society publications) whose editors are usually appointed on a part-time basis with specified tenure. The *Annals* belong to the latter category.⁸ For a full-time editor, the contract with the appointing body will be similar to any other editorial post and obviously the terms of employment will be clearly spelt out, as in the case of the editor of *JAMA*. The authority to hire and fire lies with the Executive Vice-President of AMA but with the *British Medical Journal*, the editor of *BMJ*⁹ is answerable not to a particular individual but to the general body of BMA at large. With part-time editors, who represent the vast majority of medical journals worldwide, their relationship with the appointing body or society is quite different because their positions are usually honorary (i.e. without remuneration) and their contributions are more a labour of love. A conflict of interest and interference of editorial functions are less likely to occur with honorary and part-time editors and there is usually greater mutual respect between the editor and society because each party has more to gain by maintaining a healthy professional relationship.

The World Association of Medical Editors¹⁰ (WAME) was formed in 1995 following an initiative by the Bellagio Group of 22 medical editors to address common problems faced by editors worldwide. Each editor working with his/her own editorial board has to contend with a great number of issues. Peer-review workshops have been held to address one such specific issue. I think that editorial independence and freedom from external interference including the association or appointing body is another issue that is worthy of a joint discourse amongst editors worldwide. Editorial independence is the cornerstone for the integrity of a journal. I believe WAME should take the initiative to lead this debate through tele-conferencing or organising a workshop so that we can come out with some guidelines on the conduct of Editor-Owner relationship and some good can come out of this sad George Lundberg saga.

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